

LAHOMA

By JOHN
BRECKENRIDGE
ELLIS

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CHAPTER XVI.

"Will you marry me?"

FOR hours Wilfred sat opposite, staring at Lahoma's worn face, pathetic in its youthful roundness, from which the bloom had vanished, wondering at her grace, beauty, helplessness and perfect faith in him. That faith revealed itself in every line of the form lying along the seat and spoke from the unconscious face from which the brown hair was outspread to dry.

How oddly her voice had sounded! How strange had been its accent when she said, "It never entered my mind that I was the little girl!" Had she been sorry for the thought to come? Did she think less of him because he had not remained true to Annabel? Would it not have been far better to wait until reaching their destination before hinting of love? Even while perplexed over these problems and while charmed by that appealing face, with the softly parted lips, by the figure that stirred in the rhythm of slumber, other thoughts, other objects weighed upon him—the two dead men, the dead horse just outside. One of those men might be Red Kimball.

Armed and watchful, Wilfred waited through the hours. When no longer able to bear the uncertainty he crept from the stage with the lantern and examined the recent scene of a furious struggle. There were only two slain—the driver and one of Red Kimball's companions. Either Kimball and his other comrade had escaped or had been captured. If any of the attacking party had fallen the bodies had been borne away. Bloodstains indicated that more than two had been shot. From that ghastly sight it was a relief to find himself once more enclosed by the coach walls with Lahoma so peacefully sleeping.

Once he fell into a dose from which he was startled by the impression that soft noises, not of wind or rain, were creeping over the earth. He sat erect, with the confused fancy that wolves were slinking among the wheels, were glaring up at the windows, were dragging away the corpses. The sudden movement of his hand as it grasped his pistol awoke Lahoma.

She opened her eyes wide, but did not lift her cheek from the arm that lay along the cushion. "There you are," she said, "just as I was dreaming."

He pretended not to be uneasy, but his ears strained to catch the meaning of those mysterious movements of the night. Her voice cut across the vague murmur of the open plain:

"You only came once!"

Although her eyes were wide, she was apparently but half awake. Not a muscle moved as she looked into his face. "I thought," she murmured, "it was on account of Annabel."

"I went away because I loved you," he answered softly. "I promised Brick



"There you are!" she said.

"I'd go if I felt myself caring, and nobody could help caring for you. That's why I left the country. Just as soon as we laughed together—it happened. That's why I didn't come again."

"Yes," sighed Lahoma, as if it was not so hard to understand now.

"And that's why I've come back," he added. "Because I've kept on loving you."

"Yes," she sighed again. She closed her eyes and seemed to fall asleep. Perhaps it was a sort of knowing sleep that lost most of the world, but clung

tenaciously to a few ideas. The noise of the night died away. Presently he heard her murmur as a little smile crept about the parted lips. "The cove's pretty big—there's more room than I thought."

When she was wide awake daylight had slipped through the windows. "Oh, Wilfred!" she exclaimed, sitting suddenly erect and putting her hands to her head mechanically. "Is—are we all right?"

"All right," said the young man cheerily. "There's a good deal of snow on the ground, but it was blown off the trail for the most part. Some friends have provided us with the means of going forward."

"But I don't understand."

"We'll finish the sandwiches and melt some snow for water and then mount. Look—see those two Indian ponies fastened to the tongue of the stage? They'll carry us to the next station like the wind."

She stared from the window, bewildered.

"I don't know any more about them than you," he answered her thoughts. "But there they are and here we are." He said nothing about the bodies evidently carried away by those who had brought the ponies. "It's all a mystery—a mystery of the plains. I haven't unraveled the very first thread of it. What's the use? The western way is to take what comes, isn't it, whether northers or ponies? There's a much bigger mystery than all that filling my mind."

"What is that?"

"You."

She bent over the sandwich with heightened color. "Poor Brick!" she murmured, as if to divert his thoughts. But his sympathy just then was not for Brick.

"Lahoma, you said that this is a subject a man should bring up."

She looked at him brightly, still flushing. "Well?"

"I'm bringing it up, Lahoma."

"But we must be planning to save Brick from arrest."

"I'm hoping we'll get home in time. Note that I say home, Lahoma. I refer to the cove. I'm hoping we'll reach home in time to forestall Red Kimball. We've lost a great deal of time, but Brick doubtless is safely hiding. And when we get to the journey's end—Lahoma, do you know what naturally comes at the journey's end?"

"No."

"A marriage."

"I thought that was what you meant."

"Will you marry me at the journey's end?"

Lahoma turned very red and laid down the sandwich. Then she laughed. Then she started up. "Let's get on the ponies!" she cried.

The snow that morning lay in drifts from five to eight inches across the trail and to the height of several feet up against those rock walls, raising, as on vast artificial tables, the higher stretches of the Kiowa country. But by noon the plain was scarcely streaked with white, and when the sun set there was nothing to suggest that a snowflake had ever fallen in that sad strewn world. When the rude cabins and hasty tents of the last stage station in Greer county showed dark and white against the horizon of a springlike morning Wilfred cried exultantly:

"The end of the journey!"

And Lahoma, suddenly showing in her cheeks all the roses that had opened in her dreams, repeated gayly, yet a little brokenly:

"The end of the journey!"

The end of the journey meant a wedding. The plains blossom with endless flower gardens and the mountains sing together when the end of the journey means a wedding.

Leaving Lahoma at the small new hotel, from whose boards the sun began boiling out resin as soon as it was well aloft, Wilfred hurried after a fresh horse to carry him at once to the cove, ten miles away. Warning must be given to Brick Wilfred first of all. Lahoma even had a wild hope that Brick might devise some means whereby he could attend the wedding without danger of arrest, but to Wilfred this seemed impossible.

He had gone but a few steps from the hotel when he came face to face with the sheriff of Greer county. Cutting short his old friend's outburst of pleasure—

"Look here, Mizoo," said Wilfred, drawing him aside from the curious throng on the sidewalk, "have you got a warrant against Brick Willock?"

Mizoo tapped his breast. "Here!" he said. "Know where he is?"

Wilfred sighed with relief. "At any rate, you don't!" he cried.

"No use riding over to the cove," remarked his friend, with a grin. "That is, unless you want to call on some friends of mine—deputies. They're living in the dugout, just laying for Wilfred to show himself."

"But, Mizoo," expostulated Wilfred, "why are you taking so much trouble against my best friend? The warrant ought to be enough, and if you can't get a chance to serve it on him that's not your fault. Your deputies haven't any right in that cove, and I'm going to smoke 'em out."

Mizoo chewed, with a deprecatory shake of his head. "See here, old tap," he murmured, "don't you say nothing about being Brick Willock's friend. The whole country is roused against him. Heard of them three bodies?"

Wilfred explained that he had just come to town.

"Well, good Lord, then, the pleasure I'm going to have in telling you something you don't know and something that's full of meat! Let's go where we can sit down—this ain't no standing news." The lank, red faced sheriff started across the street without looking to see if he were followed.

He did not stop till he was in his room at the hotel. "Now," he said, locking the door, "sit down. Yes, you bet, I got a warrant against Brick Willock! It was sworn out by a fellow named Jeremiah Kimball. You know him as 'Red.' The form's regular, charges weighty. Brick Willock was once a member of Red Kimball's gang. He's the only one that didn't come in to get his amnesty. See? Well, he killed Red's brother—shot 'im. Gledware's coming on to witness it. Willock will claim he done the deed to save Gledware's life—his and his little gal's. But Gledware will show it was otherwise. Red told me all about it. Brick's a murderer, and, worst of all, he's a murderer without an amnesty—that's the only difference between him and Red. Well, old tap, I took my oath to do my duty. You know what that signifies."

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INTERNATIONAL
SUNDAY SCHOOL
LESSON

(By E. O. SELLERS, Acting Director of the Sunday School Course of the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.)
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LESSON FOR JANUARY 16

PETER'S SERMON AT PENTECOST.

LESSON TEXT—Acts